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ABSTRACT

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BEGINNING A COLLEGE PROGRAM: ASSISTING TEACHERS TO DEVELOP VISUAL LITERACY APPROACHES IN PUBLIC SCHOOL CLASSROOMS

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IS003810

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper documents the development and implementation of a graduate class in Education titled: Visual Literacy and the Film Image in Education. The class is the focal point of what will be a continuing effort in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin to facilitate the development of Visual Literacy skills in teachers and future teachers. The class attempts to develop the desire and ability of participants to plan and actually use Visual Literacy approaches in their work with students. The class also attempts to foster the development of research on topics related to the emerging field of Visual Literacy. The majority of participants in the class are teachers-in-service or full time graduate students.

II. RATIONALE FOR INITIATING A PROGRAM IN THE STUDY OF VISUAL LITERACY AT THE COLLEGE LEVEL

A. Theoretical Considerations

1. The Okoboji Assumptions

One of the first efforts to address and try to make explicit the assumptions underlying the concept of visual literacy was implemented by one of the committees at the 1976 Lake Okoboji Educational Media Leadership Conference.(1) This group identified two philosophical assumptions related to the value of individual freedom. The first assumption views "visual literacy as a means of safeguarding the individual's pursuit of truth from the possibility of inappropriate manipulation or control by external forces."(2) This assumption implies that there has been a media explosion over the past century that continues to influence, add to, interpret, and alter the ways in which individuals come to terms with reality. The "new" media--film, radio, television, the computer, etc.--are a potential threat to the individual's pursuit of truth because they somehow quantitatively and qualitatively alter an individual's perception of reality. Not only do these media alter reality, they are themselves new additions to reality. The argument goes that the production of mediated messages is in the hands of others who might manipulate mediated messages in ways that would distort reality. Advertising, for example, is often called into question in this regard. It would follow, then, that a knowledge of the techniques and processes that go into the production of mediated messages is necessary in order to allow the individual to discriminate the truth from intentional or unintentional distortion. This discriminating ability to observe, analyze, and evaluate mediated messages safeguards the individual's freedom in pursuing knowledge and truth.

The Okoboji Committee sums up this assumption in the following way:

> This assumption grows out of a mistrust of the abilities (or intentions) of those who have control over mediated messages or a concern that the very nature of the medium distorts reality. It assumes that being aware of this and having a basic understanding of how mediated messages are generated will allow the individual to protect himself from potential harm. It assumes that visual literacy is a way of allowing the individual to retain his individual freedom to learn about his world without the threat of potential domination and control by mediated messages. Philosophically, the assumption places visual literacy as a response necessary to increase the probability that individualism will survive.(3)

Consistent with this assumption are the insights put forth by Marshall McLuhan and his followers. While the Okoboji Committee focused on the intentional or unintentional distortion of the mediated message, McLuhan focuses on the influence of media as media. "The Medium is the Message" means that new media bring about new perceptual habits, i.e., new ways of seeing and interpreting reality, new ways of relating to reality and to each other. Any technology, McLuhan asserts, gradually creates a new human environment. Environments are active processes of which we are not ordinarily aware. Each new medium influences, shapes, and controls the scale and form of human association and action.(4) Put more simply, McLuhan has re-stated the expression, "The medium is the message" as "We shape our tools and then our tools shape us." The telephone, for example, has influenced and shaped the scale and form of our association with one another. This tool we have shaped, now shapes us.

Technology continues its rapid expansion and various new media continue to shape the ways in which we relate to reality and to each other. Media literacy, a study of the way the very nature of the media affect reality, becomes an imperative for our age. Houk and Bogart's Media Literacy--Thinking About is a good example of the approach applied to the public school classroom.(5) They seem to have taken McLuhan's specific suggestion for this type of study (6) and elaborated upon it for the public schools.

The second philosophical assumption underlying the concept of Visual Literacy that was identified by the Okoboji

Committee regards the concept as a vehicle for increasing the individual's ability to communicate with others. Man as a social being seeks to communicate with others. Spoken and written words are one means of communication. The media explosion of the past century has created many new ways of communicating which have become integral parts of our culture. Some of these new media, for example, film and television, have important or dominant visual dimensions. If McLuhan's insights are to be accepted even in part, these media have and are shaping our environment. They are affecting the ways in which we communicate with each other. Contemporary individuals in technologically advanced countries receive vast quantities of information and other communication from the mass media--radio, recorded music, movies, highly visual mass print publications, television. These and other forms of communication are common and accepted, some would say dominant, forms of communication in our culture. These media, developed within the last century, provide alternative modes of self-expression that students encounter every day in our culture and have been significant sources of learning for them. Therefore, these media deserve serious study as forms of communication to be experienced and evaluated in ways consistent with the inherent nature of each medium. Further, students should be guided and encouraged to express themselves in these new media. Purely print expression is no longer enough in a world so rich in other forms of communication.

The thrust of this assumption can be summarized through the expression of a college undergraduate, majoring in English education at The University of Texas. After completing her first slide tape presentation, she said to her instructor, "What I appreciated most about the experience was the opportunity to learn a new way for me to express myself."

2. Media and Kids Approach

One viable current approach which is consistent with the above assumptions is put forth in the work of James Morrow and Murray Suid, specifically in their book, Media and Kids, Real World Learning in the Schools. They envision the classroom as a place where active production in all media is regarded as a natural way to learn. They see students solving problems in the arts and sciences not only through reading and writing, but also through producing radio and television shows, making films, staging playlets, designing posters, taking photographs, and creating numerous other real world artifacts. Further, they see children responding to each other's productions and to productions from the culture at large intelligently and with feeling. They believe that no medium is inherently instructional or non-instructional, and that a "popular culture" medium like the

comic book can influence a child's growth as positively as a school-endorsed medium like the overhead transparency.(7)

The significance of twentieth century technology is that it increased the variety of media modes, thus maximizing the individual's chances of finding forms that work well for him/her. Media can facilitate learning in all subject areas: mathematics, science, social studies, foreign languages, industrial arts, physical and health education. They assert that media production should occur as an integral part of a classroom's ongoing program and not just in special media courses.(8)

Particularly significant in their approach is these authors' intelligent treatment of how competence with words, the traditional literacy, meshes with the new media modes. To fear that media production will slight traditional verbal skills or to allege that visual language is replacing verbal language is to be totally out of touch with the processes by which modern media productions--ads, movies, photo essays, comic books, television shows--get made. The essential process, from the initial idea, to the final product, rests on an underpinning of words. The juxtaposition of the word and the image is often precisely what makes communication happen.(9)

In fact, there is evidence that students who are encouraged to learn from the new media modes and express themselves through them can both increase students' motivation and self-esteem and increase their print literacy skills.(10)

Morrow and Suid do overstate the legitimate case against the exaggerations and inaccuracies of "Neo-McLuhanism" and Visual Literacy, but this does not diminish the validity of their approach. Of particular interest is their description of the "Wheel," a conceptual planning device which can lead to the implementation of learning from various media modes and creative expression through various media in all subjects in public schools.

3. Visual Literacy in Teacher Education

Teacher education programs give significant emphasis to print and oral skills. However, media and visual literacy skills which complement the other literacy skills are not emphasized. If what has been said so far in this paper is true concerning the impact of new media on society and the potential of the new media for enhancing human communication, then individuals must become media and visually literate in order to be effective interpreters and communicators. Media and visual

competencies are essential to success in a society saturated with continually emerging new media. Introducing media and visual literacy education at the teacher education level is reasonable and logical. Implied, as would be expected in a university context, is that the necessary skills are identifiable, learnable, measurable, researchable. Media and visual literacy should be a part of teacher education programs so prospective teachers and teachers-in-service can develop personal literacy skills as well as skills to teach media/visual literacy effectively to students.(11)

Since most students have not had formal training in the development of media/visual literacy skills while in elementary or secondary schools, training public school teachers is an important focal point for the dissemination of these skills into the schools and throughout society. Because Colleges of Education are, or should be, centers for research in education, they have the potential for providing the necessary research and developmental support for the study of media/visual literacy.

B. Practical Considerations

A theoretical rationale has been laid out which hopefully establishes the need for media/visual literacy study generally and in Colleges of Education in particular. It is appropriate now to consider the practical advantages of establishing a media/visual literacy program in a College of Education and at The University of Texas in particular.

One function of any program established under the auspices of a college or university is to serve as a clearinghouse for resources and information on matters related to the program. In addition, the presence of a program often lends visibility and status to concurrent efforts being made in the community at large. Journalism schools, for example, have provided this visibility and status by hosting programs of various kinds for high school journalists. It is easy to conceive of similar endeavors related to other media, such as film or television workshops or festivals.

In addition, institutions can offer rewards to adult participants in their programs in the form of college credit and advanced degrees. Teachers-in-service who will not (and should not be expected to) spend long hours in the evening or across summers re-thinking, evaluating, and/or creating innovative approaches for their classes, will gladly spend the time on these activities as part of the work in a college course for which they receive credit. And they pay tuition to do it.

Studies are carried out in cooperation with trained professionals who have committed a significant part of their professional lives to a given college program and can function as expert consultants.

Four components of a new Learning Resources Center in the College of Education at The University of Texas at Austin provide practical and concrete support for the effort being mounted to establish a program in Media Education on media/visual literacy. The first component is the Instructional Materials Collection, recently consolidated from several campus locations, which holds print and non-print materials. A recent small windfall source of funds made it possible to acquire the nucleus of a fine, mostly print, collection of materials to support media/visual literacy studies. The second component is the Equipment Loan which makes available to faculty, staff, and students a wide variety of media hardware, including 35 mm cameras, tape recorders, VTR porta-packs, movie cameras, and even a portable computer terminal. The third component is a color television studio capable of producing broadcast quality productions. Finally, and of vital importance to program efforts, is the fourth component, the Media Lab. This is a walk-in facility that makes available copy-stands, sound rooms, and a variety of other simple technologies that can be used in media production.

III. GRADUATE CLASS SERVES AS FOCAL POINT FOR VISUAL LITERACY PROGRAM EFFORT

Having set the context both in theoretical and practical terms, a description of the beginnings of the program in Visual Literacy at The University of Texas is appropriate. A graduate course titled "Visual Literacy and the Film Image" serves as a focal point for the effort and other aspects are considered in relation to it. A brief description of curriculum theory considerations underlying the course and a brief explanation of its scope and sequence will precede a discussion of other elements of the program.

A. Curriculum Theory Considerations

Various viewpoints about the nature and purpose of education, and by implication, the nature and purpose of curriculum, can be conceived to lie along a bi-polar continuum. One pole of the continuum represents curriculum viewpoints that use factors external to the individual as determinants of curriculum. For example, Competency Based Education lies toward this pole on the continuum because proponents assume that competencies can be determined which individuals can be directed to measure up to. Behaviorist theory in general would lie at this pole.

The other pole of the continuum represents curriculum viewpoints that assume factors internal to the individual to be determinants of curriculum. While any actualized curriculum must to some degree be ecclectic in its day to day workings, the underlying assumptions about external or internal determination can ordinarily be assessed. A guiding principle in the conceptualization of the curriculum for Visual Literacy and the Film Image is that students can and will accept responsibility for their own education. By and large, individuals know or can be helped to determine for themselves what things are important for them to know and do. It is the experience of this writer that students who are pursuing their own goals most often make more demands upon themselves in pursuit of their own purposes, than any rigorous alternative set of expectations would have required.(12)

1. Individual Determination of Objectives

The goal is for learning to be student-centered, with an emphasis on learning by doing because experiences which actively engage the whole person tend to stay with the individual. Modern media are very appropriate for this approach because they are not only sources of information and pleasure, but also graspable tools for active creative, and, ultimately, educational production.(13) In this graduate class students are expected to apply and/or adapt experiences, readings, discussions related to the class to their research, teaching, or other purpose. The instructor attempts to provide resources and guidelines that facilitate this process.

2. Process and Product

In most of the hands on, "learn by doing" experiences that students participate in as class activities, the emphasis is on process over product. Five students who hastily plan and shoot an 8 mm movie in two-and-a-half hours cannot be expected to produce a polished product. They can be expected: to learn much about the film medium and what goes into planning and shooting a movie; to compare critically the product of their efforts with the product of other groups working under the same constraints, and feel comfortable enough with the process to be willing to adapt and try it with their own students. The purpose of the class activities is generally to demonstrate the process rather than to create a polished product.

The "products" of the class are the mediated instructional packages or the evidence or research that the class members develop in accord with their own purposes and settings. These products are often based upon learnings gained from the processes in which they have participated. Readings and class discussions also are a significant part of the course.

B. Scope and Sequence of Class Activities

Below are listed the topics of the 15 class meetings of the Fall, 1976, semester with amplification and clarification where appropriate. Topics are being revised based on feedback from class participants.

1. Introductory class

2. Introduction to Visual Literacy
   Mary Blundell, immediate past president of IVLA and media consultant at the local Regional Educational Resources Center, presented an introduction to Visual Literacy. Using Polaroid cameras borrowed from class members, teams of students planned and shot totally visual story sequences.

3. Introduction to the Use of Film in Education
   Dale Adams,(14) a recently graduated doctoral student, made a presentation on the use of film in teaching. His research documented the history of the use of film in education, but his presentation focused mainly upon his efforts to build a literature curriculum at the Junior College level upon the study of film.

4a. Project Requirement Clarification
 b. Presentation by a member of the class who creates a cartoon that was appearing daily in The University of Texas student publication. The presentation gave the class an opportunity to interact with an artist making a serious attempt to communicate in a visual-print form and gave the artist a chance to receive feedback from a segment of the audience.(15)

5. Movies without a camera.
   a. Construct a Zoetrope(16)
   b. Make a 3-minute 16 mm write-on animated film.(17)

6. Hand Made Slides
   a. Students were shown a wide variety of types and uses of hand-made slides and then asked to practice by creating their own slides.

7. In Class 8 mm Film Making
   Using 8 mm cameras borrowed from class members, teams of students planned and shot animated or regular movies.

8. Viewing/Critique/Discussions of Class Made Films and Student-Made Films (18)

9. 16 mm Film Utilization Workshop
   Students were shown "Why Man Creates" and other highly regarded short films in order to demonstrate how the many fine 16 mm films available could be used in a variety of educational settings.

10. Visual Literacy Theory
    A presentation-discussion attempting to explore rationale for and parameters of Visual Literacy.

11. Black and White Photography, Part I: Taking and Developing Pictures
    After an Introduction to Photographic Composition, students were given inexpensive (89¢) Diana Cameras. Using Tri-X 120 film they photographed according to specified guidelines Students then developed their own film. (19)

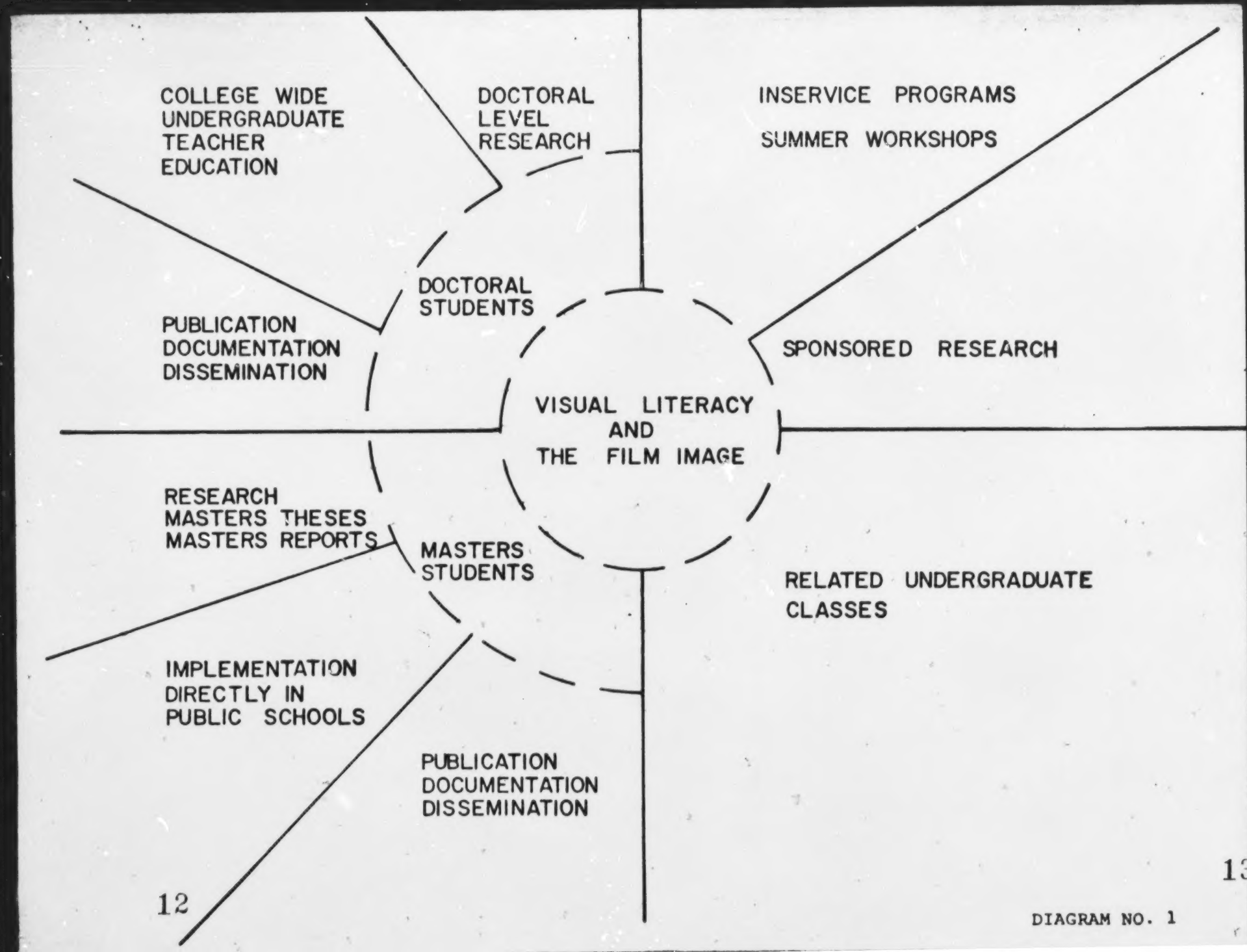
12. Black and White Photography, Part II: Contact Printing
    Students contact printed some of the pictures they took according to specified guidelines.

13. View and Critique of Final Projects
14. View and Critique of Final Projects
    Students presented the products they had developed which grew out of reading, discussions, and experiences encountered across the semester. Some specific examples are presented in the next section.

IV. VISUAL LITERACY RELATED DEVELOPMENTS SURROUNDING THE GRADUATE CLASS

While the Visual Literacy graduate class represents the focal point of the emerging Visual Literacy program at The University of Texas, it will be useful to explore how other developments relate to this effort. Diagram No. 1 represents one possible conceptualization.

The left half of the diagram considers the effect of the course to be implemented through the interests and activities of graduate students enrolled in the course.


COLLEGE WIDE
UNDERGRADUATE
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EDUCATION
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LEVEL
RESEARCH
INSERVICE PROGRAMS
SUMMER WORKSHOPS
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STUDENTS
PUBLICATION
DOCUMENTATION
DISSEMINATION
SPONSORED RESEARCH
VISUAL LITERACY
AND
THE FILM IMAGE
RESEARCH
MASTERS THESES
MASTERS REPORTS
MASTERS
STUDENTS
RELATED UNDERGRADUATE
CLASSES
IMPLEMENTATION
DIRECTLY IN
PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PUBLICATION
DOCUMENTATION
DISSEMINATION

DIAGRAM NO. 1

A. Doctoral Level Students

Doctoral level students can and do contribute to the effort to implement media/visual literacy in three ways. (See Diagram No. 2.) First, whether participating in the Media Education Program or other programs in the College, nearly all of the doctoral students who take the course are Teaching Assistants in the College. There is evidence, mostly through verbal feedback, that activities participated in as part of the Visual Literacy class have been adapted for use in undergraduate classes. Skills learned have likewise been transferred. Secondly, graduate students at The University of Texas are encouraged to write and publish. Some of their efforts involve documenting their work as instructional designers and curriculum planners. Third, dissertation research can and has been associated with this effort to explore visual literacy. Four examples can serve to illustrate what is happening. While none of these efforts find roots solely in the nascent Visual Literacy program, all four have drawn upon it and are making contributions to it. The research is the following:

1. A completed dissertation on the history of film study in public school classrooms.(20)

2. A field based dissertation study of the quality of mediated materials actually being used in specific Texas public schools.

3. A study of brain hemisphere dominance in verbal and visual learning.

4. A study of factors in Earth Science textbook line-drawn illustrations that lead to mistaken interpretations, with an aim to improve the quality of those illustrations.

B. Masters Level Students

The contribution of masters level students parallels that of doctoral students, but with significant differences. (See Diagram No. 3.) The majority of students in the class are masters level in-service and pre-service teachers. A significant thrust of the class was an attempt to develop the desire and ability of these students to plan and actually use media/visual literacy approaches with their students. One particularly important outcome of the class was that students in the class took a lot of the exercises and demonstrations often used under the general rubric of an introduction to visual literacy and

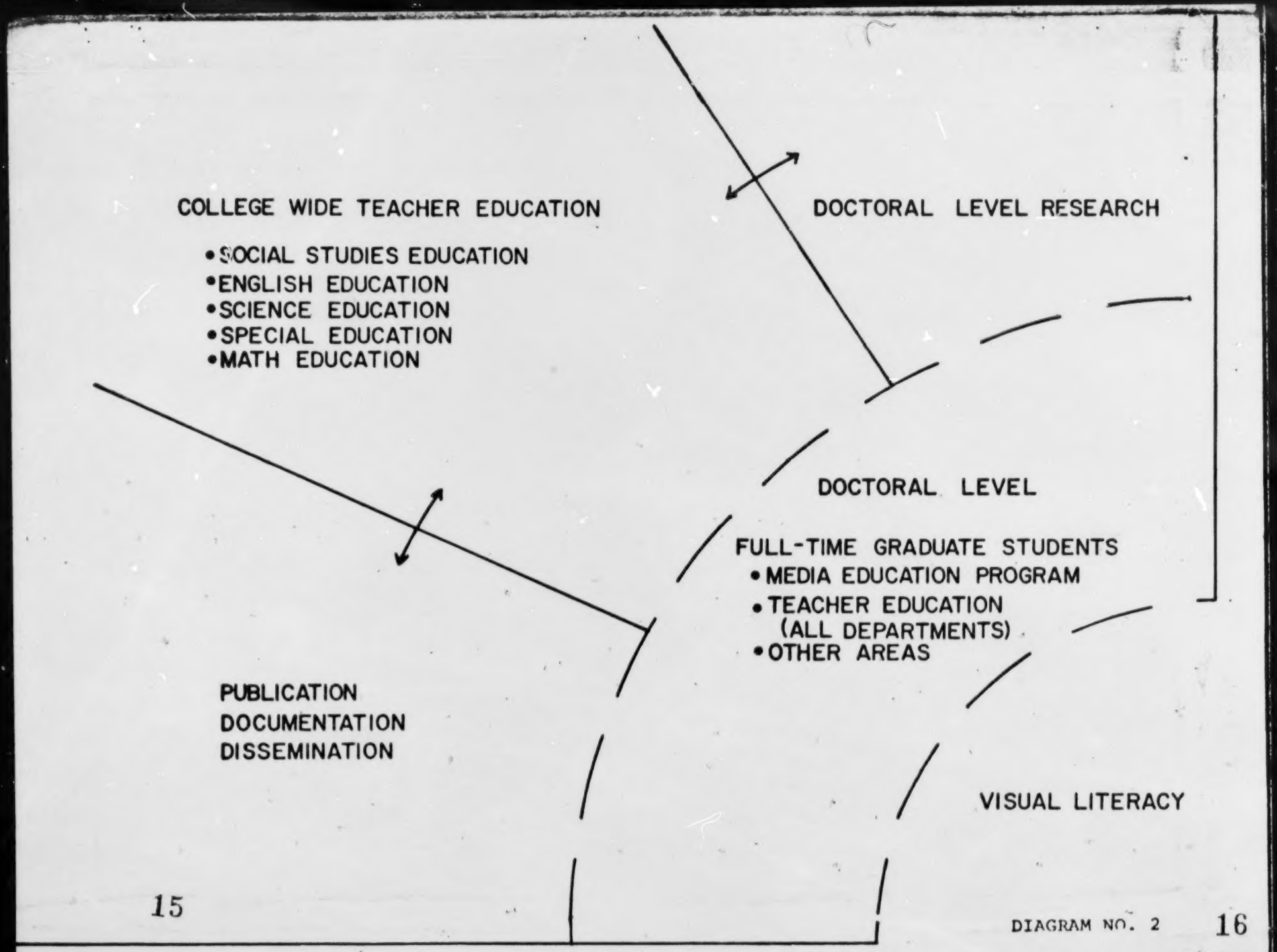
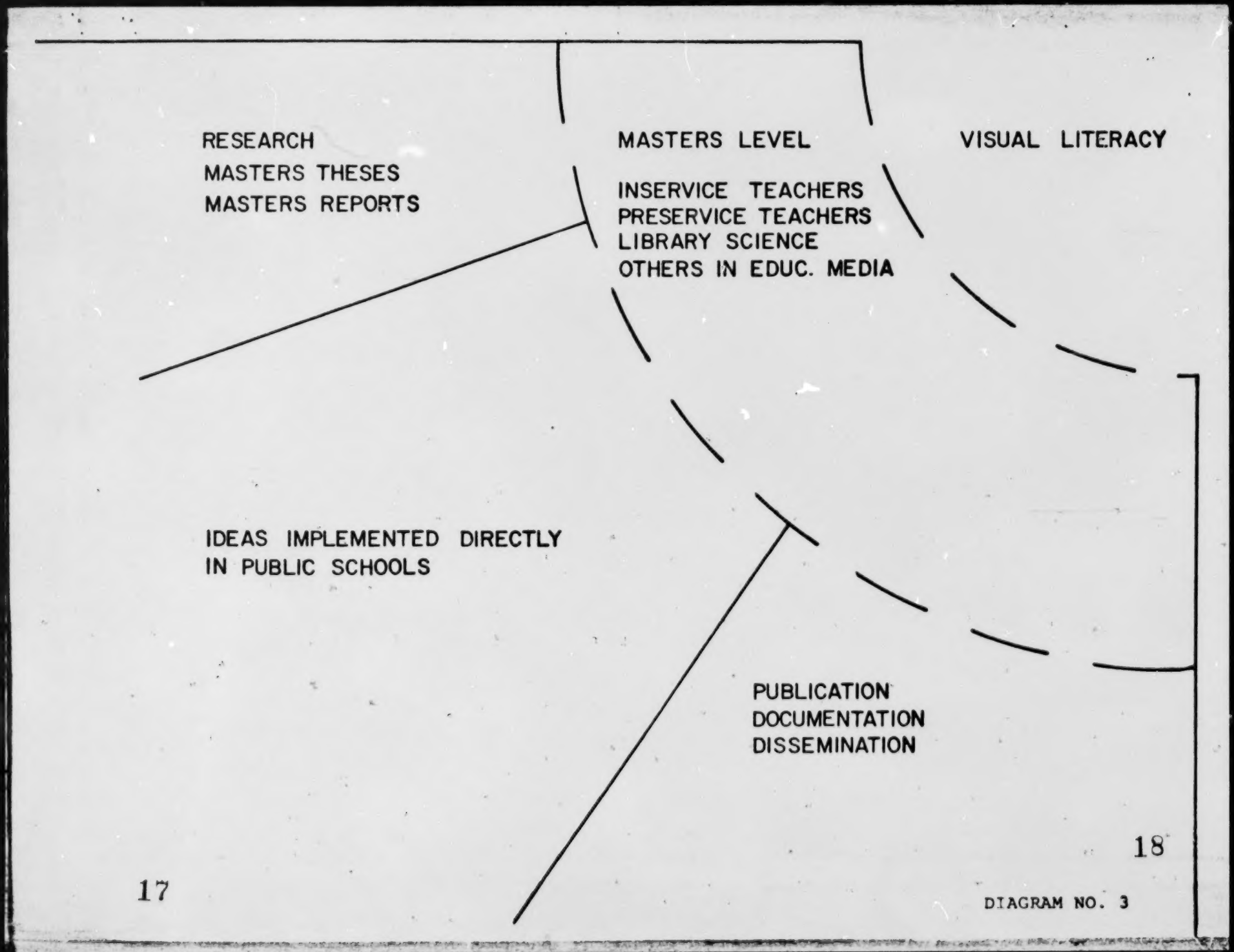

COLLEGE WIDE TEACHER EDUCATION
• SOCIAL STUDIES EDUCATION
• ENGLISH EDUCATION
• SCIENCE EDUCATION
• SPECIAL EDUCATION
• MATH EDUCATION
DOCTORAL LEVEL RESEARCH
DOCTORAL LEVEL
FULL-TIME GRADUATE STUDENTS
• MEDIA EDUCATION PROGRAM
• TEACHER EDUCATION (ALL DEPARTMENTS)
• OTHER AREAS
PUBLICATION
DOCUMENTATION
DISSEMINATION
VISUAL LITERACY

DIAGRAM NO. 2


RESEARCH
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PRESERVICE TEACHERS
LIBRARY SCIENCE
OTHERS IN EDUC. MEDIA
VISUAL LITERACY
IDEAS IMPLEMENTED DIRECTLY
IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PUBLICATION
DOCUMENTATION
DISSEMINATION

DIAGRAM NO. 3

made innovations in their teaching by uniquely integrating what they learned into their own teaching settings. The processes that students participated in were integrated into the products they created. Some of the projects completed include the following:

1. A unit on creative expression created by an English teacher. A series of print/visual stimuli are used to trigger creative expression in the film medium.

2. A unit on the Hero, created by an English teacher, which integrated 16 mm films from the local Regional Service Center into a unit she had been teaching with only print resources.

3. A unit on Love Relationships created for a Family Living Class in which students created hand-made slides and write-on animated film as vehicles for expressing their thoughts and feelings.

4. A unit on Life-Career Stages created for a Family Living Class using the Morrow and Suid "Wheel" for curriculum planning. Student expression was in the form of a "wall mural" depicting characteristics of career stages, hand-made slides, and still photography.

5. A "test" of visual literacy presented in slide-tape format.

6. A photo series developed to teach visual elements of three-dimensional objects.

7. A unit on animated film which included a sound-film demonstration on how to do clay animation, plus a short clay-animation film.

8. A multi-image slide presentation for junior high school science students on the geology of the Austin area.

9. A collection of ready-to-use materials for an elementary workshop on Visual Literacy.

10. A collection of still photo and video-taped materials for a high school "invention center" where students can go to seek ideas for print expression.

11. Three different units were prepared on the study of advertising. All three were supported by collections of print ads and/or slides of ads. One student further developed a unit on persuasive writing based on the collection of ads she assembled.

12. A unit designed to use wordless picture books to teach reading to early elementary students.

13. A slide-tape presentation on yearbook layout and design.

14. A librarian in the class previewed over 40 short films at the Regional Educational Resource Center and created a list of films that might be useful to her.

15. A cartoonist in the class assembled a substantial collection of artifacts relating to the history of cartooning. The following semester she used these resources to create the Master's Report for her degree.(21)

16. A resource collection of visual materials for teaching ecology in junior high earth science classes.

Some of the projects mentioned here have led to further research and publication at the masters level. (See numbers 11 and 15 above.) In addition, three students in the class are working on articles based on their projects for national or regional curriculum and media publications.

Three students with advanced technical skills and who were not public school associated completed the following:

1. Created an inexpensive stereoscope. Studied the history of its use in education and explored contemporary educational applications; for example, to help students of solid geometry who have difficulty conceptualizing two dimensional drawings in three dimensions.

2. A three-screen multi-image presentation on the Baha'i religious faith.

3. A set of large format 11" x 14" high-contrast photograhic prints using newly marketed Kodak papers.

C. Related Undergraduate Courses

In addition to its direct influence upon students in the class, Visual Literacy and the Film Image is related in purpose to two areas of undergraduate instruction. (See Diagram No. 4.) The first is a popular elective titled: Selection, Preparation, and Utilization of Audio-Visual Media and Materials. Some of the activities in the syllabus for this class are very similar to those in the Visual Literacy class. The second is a two-credit-hour component of a new experimental block-scheduled program for student teachers in English and Social Studies. Because participants in the block are in the process of preparing for teaching, there is much similarity of purpose between the graduate class and the block component. They use the same approach and share resources.

E. In-service Programs and Sponsored Projects

A logical outgrowth of the Visual Literacy effort as it is described here is the development of in-service programs and the design of research projects supported by grant money. (See Diagram No. 1.) Because the program is less than two years old, and because other parts have received higher priority for development, these two areas have not yet been explored seriously.

V. SUMMARY

An effort to develop a program in Visual Literacy has been initiated at The University of Texas at Austin. This paper has explained the rationale for undertaking the effort from both a theoretical and practical point of view. It explains how a graduate course is the focal point from which the program has developed. The curriculum position reflected in this course and the sequence of topics in the course is explained. Finally, other developments in the program and how they relate to the class are explored.

VISUAL LITERACY

RELATED UNDERGRADUATE MEDIA OFFERINGS

1. SELECTION, PREPARATION, AND UTILIZATION OF MEDIA AND MATERIALS

2. MEDIA COMPONENT OF EXPERIMENTAL BLOCK SCHEDULED STUDENT TEACHING PROGRAM

DIAGRAM NO. 4

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NOTES

(1) **Visual Literacy (The Last Word), Committee Report** on "The Identification and Analysis of Selected Assumptions Underlying the Concept of Visual Literacy," pp. 117-29.

(2) Ibid., p. 118.

(3) Ibid., p. 119.

(4) McLuhan, pp. viii, ix, and 24.

(5) Houk and Bogart, see especially Chapter 1.

(6) McLuhan, p. X.

(7) Morrow and Suid, p. 1.

(8) Ibid., p. 2.

(9) Ibid., pp. 5,6.

(10) Peté, Conclusion.

(11) Visual Literacy (The Last Word), Committee Report on "Visual Literacy in Teacher Education," pp. 25-30

(12) Gohring, pp. 5-7.

(13) Morrow and Suid, p. 7.

(14) Adams, see entire work.

(15) Holland, see entire work.

(16) Holland, see entire work.

(16) Wentz, see entire work.

(17) Movies and Slides without a Camera.

(18) Your Programs from Kodak, p. 12

(19) The Camera Cookbook, see entire work.

(20) Adams, see entire work.

(21) Holland, see entire work.